

Point-Counterpoint

High School Competency Test

January 26, 2001

The High School Competency Test was developed by educators across Alaska because of concerns voiced by the business and university communities, who felt that Alaska's high schools were graduating students who were not capable of doing high school level work. For too many Alaskans, the current high school diploma is viewed as little more than a certificate of attendance. The Competency Test was also intended to gain the public's confidence in our schools, give meaning to high school diplomas, and to gain a measure of accountability from the schools.

Students begin taking the three-part test in their sophomore year. They can re-take any part four more times before graduation. Students cannot "fail" the Competency Test until they take it the second time in the Spring of their senior year. Until then, it is a diagnostic test. There are six more opportunities to re-take portions after graduation -- for a total of eleven chances to demonstrate basic literacy!

Some have called for a delay before requiring evidence of mastery of these skills to earn a diploma. We have to ask ourselves, however, what would a delay accomplish? What guarantee is there that anything will change?

I fear that that some in our educational system, by asking for a delay, are acknowledging that they haven't done their jobs to lead, motivate, teach, and to remediate where necessary. While the Competency Test is not the only tool to improve our schools, it certainly should be one of the tools.

I have heard from the parents of those who did pass who believe they are too easy. I have to remind them that this is a test of basic skills. Many parents also believe that there is a welcome consequence to the Competency Test -- schools, seeing the results, are providing necessary remedial help for their children. Those parents are asking us to "stay the course".

Ultimately, I would like to invest more in our children's education. However, we can not blindly do this. With state funds, there must be accountability. Asking for a delay is choosing not to be accountable. Unless and until our schools are accountable for our investment, it is unlikely that there will be additional funds for our public schools.